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EGMONT KEY LIGHTHOUSE MORE THAN 100 YEARS OLD

By HAMPTON DUNN

EGMONT KEY --- There's an important landmark standing on Egmont Key, this little isle at the mouth of Tampa Bay. It is the historic lighthouse which dates back before the Civil War.

As a matter of fact, the Spaniards had some sort of lighthouse here centuries ago. But the U.S. Lighthouse Service built one here in 1848, turning it on in May of that year. But, alas, it was blown down in that mighty hurricane that swept the Gulf Coast on Sept. 24, 1848!

The keeper of the light, worried when he became aware that a storm was coming, speculated that it could even tear down the tall structure, even though its walls were two-feet-deep thick. He took his family in a small skiff, tied it securely to a palm tree and rode out the hurricane in that fashion. The lighthouse did, indeed, collapse and the next morning the island was covered by 9½ feet of water. The lightkeeper, his name was Marvel Edwards, rowed into Tampa, resigned and got out of lighthouse keeping.

The lighthouse was rebuilt by the government in 1858, shortly before the Civil War. The strategic location of Egmont and Mullet Keys caught the eye of a young West Pointer, his name was Col. Robert E. Lee, when he led a party of U.S. Engineers to this area in 1849. He recommended that the islands be reserved for coastal defense. During the Indian wars, captured Seminoles were kept on the Key awaiting transportation to reservations out west.

The tall, white tower reaches 87 feet in the air. Its 144,400 candlepower lamp can be seen 15 miles at sea. A Coast Guard detachment maintains the light, radio beacon and fog horn.